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Latin American Trends

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LATIN AMERICAN TRENDS

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Argentina: Combatting the Terrorists

A member of the Montoneros guerrilla organization has reportedly claimed that his group is prepared to wage a prolonged nationwide war of attrition with the armed forces which it fully expects to win. He claims the support of hundreds of thousands of activists and sympathizers in all major cities and towns. His claims of popular support are, of course, exaggerated and self serving; most intelligence estimates place Montonero strength at no more than a few thousand militants and active supporters.

Nonetheless, guerrilla optimism is by no means unfounded. The Montoneros, for example, have operated virtually at will for a number of years, and the armed forces' highly visible campaign over the past two months does not appear to have reduced the guerrillas' overall capability, despite government claims of success. Indeed, in the past two weeks, the guerrillas have gone on the offensive with another rampage that has included the killing of a retired general, attempts against others, and the kidnaping of yet another Argentine business executive for ransom. The latest activities seem aimed at humiliating the armed forces and provoking harsh counter-measures that will gain them wider public sympathy.

The Montoneros in particular possess a high degree of motivation and discipline, huge financial resources, and good training. But, unlike the other principal extremist group, the Marxist Peoples Revolutionary Army, the Montoneros claim to be the true embodiment of Peronism, an ill-defined set of beliefs whose hold on the Argentine people many fear to challenge. Indeed, many more conventional Peronists still do not consider the Montoneros completely beyond the pale, despite their tactics. As long as this is so, the authorities are unlikely to wage a completely unrestrained campaign

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on all fronts against this, the most significant of the terrorist groups. In the final analysis, the military may remain content to approach the Montoneros on a strictly military basis, attacking their camps and interrupting supply lines, recognizing military inability to blunt the appeal of such groups short of reordering all aspects of national life.

To view the guerrillas as a purely military threat, however, is to ignore and perhaps even enhance the factors that make adherence to the groups attractive. The dissidents draw on the sons and daughters of respectable citizens for support and are well in touch with--and able to play on--the hopes and frustrations of this largely middle-class nation. Many young Argentines see the guerrilla movement as the only way they can personally have a hand in changing a highly corrupt, ineffectual political system. One such individual, the son of the governor of Neuquen province, was involved in the recent guerrilla attack on air force General Corbat. The governor's son, a military conscript known to the intended victim, helped the dissidents gain access to the general and apparently participated in shooting him.

For some time to come the armed forces will continue to face a particularly galling dilemma. On the one hand, as security elements, they cannot wholly ignore the presence of violent insurgents. At the same time, however, they seem unable to wage all-out war because of the continuing public sympathy for the guerrillas. Moreover, the military realize that by being repressive enough to rout the guerrillas, they could well engender the widespread popular repudiation that the guerrillas hope to provoke. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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